

BRANDING/MARKETING
West Liberty University
Strategic Planning Task Force Concept Paper (2018-19)
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INTRODUCTION

Branding and Marketing. In broad terms, *branding* is “who we are” and *marketing* is “how we build awareness.” *Branding* is our strategic identity, while *marketing* encompasses our tactical goals. More specifically, *branding* is the practice of creating symbols, ideas, or designs that identify an organization or a product and help differentiate it from its peers.

Branding

Why is Branding Important? According to Pasternak (2017), universities have shown a steep increase in strategic branding efforts in the past decade. Universities use brands to communicate who they are and how they are distinct--both inside and outside of the organization. Externally, a coherent brand is vitally important to a university’s visibility, marketing, and recruitment. Internally, the brand identity is a conceptual partner to the institutional mission and serves as an aid to good communication among constituents. The brand identity is essentially the central culture of a place. This identity and culture precedes all specific marketing or recruitment tactics and is fundamentally defined by the community. The building of a brand does not start with *selling* something but rather by *being* something, and then effectively communicating what that something is.

The WLU Brand

Who Are We? Having achieved university status just ten years ago, West Liberty University (WLU) is arguably a transitional entity. On the one hand, we continue to identify ourselves as a small, close-knit, regional institution. On the other hand, a rapid expansion of programs and global outreach form a new but undeniable part of our current identity. A recent turnover of faculty along with the changing nature of academia solidify our participation in a global community of thinkers, educators, and innovators. While we are still small in size, we are *more than* regional, local and traditional.

2016 Brand Statement. The current WLU brand statement is: “We are a caring, quality, affordable institution that provides the total college experience.” The genesis for this brand statement came in 2016, when WLU sought for a concise yet comprehensive answer to the question, “Who are we?” Subsequently, a series of strategic meetings, compression-planning

sessions, and research was conducted with a variety of broad-based constituency groups and stakeholders that included current students, prospective students, faculty, staff, alumni, local business leaders, and others. From these meetings and research, common themes emerged. From those common stakeholder themes, the following four brand attributes were established to answer who WLU is: (1) Caring, (2) Quality, (3) Affordable, and (4) Total College Experience. Thus, the WLU brand statement became, “Caring, Quality, Affordable, Total College Experience” (<https://westliberty.edu/brand/>). As a direct result of this brand statement project, several visual marketing elements were created and are currently being used (see Marketing section).

Current Mission Statement, Vision Statement, and Core Values. WLU’s current mission statement, vision statement, and core values (<https://westliberty.edu/brand/>) are listed below:

Mission Statement:

To provide our students the opportunity for a high quality undergraduate, graduate, and professional education through appropriate formats and venues.

Vision Statement:

West Liberty University will be the premier 4-year institution of higher learning in the Upper Ohio Valley by:

1. providing its students with a high-quality education wherever and however courses are delivered that will prepare them for employment in current and future job markets or for continuing their education;
2. achieving excellence in all facets of university life, including academics, student experiences, athletics, and the visual and performing arts;
3. providing a comprehensive and significant liberal arts foundation wherever and however courses are delivered that will prepare its students to communicate effectively, think critically, and assume roles as productive citizens of the global community;
4. pursuing financial stability as an institution while also remaining affordable for its students;
5. emphasizing high-quality professional relationships between students and faculty, both in and out of the classroom, through excellent instruction in any format or location and advising;
6. standing as a vigorous and vibrant source for the creation of knowledge through innovative and creative research and scholarly activity;
7. providing technological capabilities and infrastructure to reflect contemporary educational needs and standards;
8. facilitating vibrant relationships with the surrounding community through social, civic, and economic engagement activities, and building strong and enduring relationships with alumni and benefactors; and

9. supporting a safe campus environment that encourages diversity and inclusion for all members of the WLU community.

Core Values:

Opportunity, Caring, Professionalism and Integrity, Excellence, Civic Engagement.

Logos and Signage. In about 2009, WLU adopted an official logo and wordmark, along with colors and text font for the logo and wordmark. Although, WLU has a branding standards guide on the WLU website (<https://westliberty.edu/brand/>) – providing guidance for logos, color usage, typography, and services – the logo and wordmark are not trademarked. This means, at this time, that the WLU logo and wordmark can be altered by anyone – the colors, font, size, dimensions – to publish documents, signage, merchandise, etc. Also, across campus and online, there is inconsistency with logo branding. Various signs within buildings, fields, uniforms, and on vehicles display different WLU logos and/or different variations of the WLU brand logo. However, WLU is currently in the process of attempting to trademark the logo and wordmark in order to protect the brand, mark, identity, and brand integrity.

2018 Stakeholder Common Ideas. In Fall 2018, WLU created a Strategic Planning Task Force. The members of the task force administered multiple compression-planning sessions with various stakeholders, on- and off-campus. Through those sessions, common themes became evident. Through the lenses of these common themes, the question of “Who we are?” can possibly be examined. From those common themes, the various stakeholders described WLU as follows. The common ideas of the stakeholders are shown in the table below:

Common ideas of what we are/are not:	Faculty/Academic Staff	Administration	Students	Parents	Alumni/Donors	Student Services	Athletic Staff	Local Businesses/Government	Local Schools
We have caring staff.	X	X			X				
We have quality faculty.	X	X	X		X		X		
We are not a University with good, well-maintained facilities.	X	X	X	X	X	X			
We have a safe campus.	X	X		X	X				
We offer quality academic programs.	X	X		X	X				X
We are affordable / good value.	X	X		X	X	X			X
We have a good athletic reputation.	X	X					X		
We have a tight-knit community.	X				X	X			
We offer small class sizes with the opportunity for relationships with faculty (good student-faculty ratio).	X				X	X			
We are a "suitcase" college with limited activities and food options on the weekends.	X		X	X	X		X		
We have poor parking.			X				X	X	
We have an expanding offering of graduate programs.	X							X	

Marketing

Why is Marketing Important? According to the American Marketing Association (as cited by Kretovics, 2011), a usable definition of marketing is “the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large” (p. 163) and is vitally important for colleges and universities. Marketing is driven by the market – that is the buyers and the sellers. In higher education, “the institutions are the sellers and the students are the buyers” (p. 164). For colleges and universities, marketing includes internal and external communication and processes, such as personal selling, advertising, publicity, sales promotion, sponsorship, and point-of purchase. It is influenced by branding, customer (student) behavior, customer service, satisfaction, and relationships. Furthermore, marketing in higher education is to some degree the responsibility of everyone that is employed at that institution – most notably, University Communications/Marketing Departments, Admissions, Development, Alumni Affairs, Student Affairs, Academic Programs, and Human Resources (Kretovics, 2011, pp. 161-194). For most colleges and universities, their primary source of revenue is student tuition. Because of this, and the ever increasing competition for students (revenue), the majority of institutions are enrollment-driven and their marketing is directed primarily toward the recruitment of new students (Weisbrod, Ballou, & Asch, 2008).

WLU Marketing

Marketing/Branding Organizational Staffing Structure. WLU’s Office of Marketing and Brand Management is led by Tammi Secrist (Executive Director of Marketing), and contains Samantha Wilson (Graphic Designer), Jared Thompson (Creative Video Director), and Whitney Inkster (Web Master) – who currently lives in Florida and whose contract expires on June 30, 2019. There are also two undergraduate student interns that help Samantha Wilson. The Marketing and Brand Management team has reported to Scott Cook, Vice President of Enrollment Services, for the past few years.

Public Relations. A companion of WLU’s marketing and branding is Maureen Zambito, Director of Public Relations, who reports directly to the president. Maureen writes press releases, manages the university’s news site and general social media sites. Public relations is usually considered the “free” marketing—whereby it is not necessary to “buy” the publicity. There are a couple of undergraduate students that assist in this office.

Traditional and Online Marketing. In general, WLU utilizes multiple approaches to marketing. We use traditional marketing media such as television, radio, billboards, digital billboards, newspapers (specifically tabs and specialty publications). In addition, we utilize online marketing strategies such as Search engine optimization, Pay per click, Geofencing, Retargeting, General web advertisements, Streaming, and Over the Top (OTT) television streaming.

Social Media Marketing. WLU also utilizes social media sites such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, and LinkedIn. There are an estimated 160+ social media accounts representing clubs, organizations, departments, and programs all over campus, and—despite the existence of a fairly outdated social media policy ([Policy 045](#))—there is no consistent monitoring of most of these social media sites. Maureen Zambito, Director of Public Relations, manages the main WLU social media accounts. Tammi Secrist, Executive Director of Marketing, manages the *Discover West Lib* Facebook, YouTube, and LinkedIn accounts for the *Discover West Lib* channel. Student Affairs and Housing manage WLU’s general Instagram and Twitter accounts. So, WLU has three different departments (Marketing/Branding, Student Affairs, and Housing) managing the general accounts in addition to the numerous other accounts that are managed all across campus. WLU has nothing in place to monitor these many social media accounts. Currently, anyone can start up a social media account for any department, program, or group. There is no current oversight or centralization to monitor content, logo, brand integrity, messages, etc. As a result, the branding, logos, coloring, and messaging on these WLU social media sites is inconsistent.

Marketing Elements from the 2016 Brand Statement. As a direct result of the 2016 creation of WLU’s brand statement – “Caring, Quality, Affordable, Total College Experience” – several

visual marketing elements were created, such as (1) *It's a Major Thing* – videos that follow students majoring in a particular programs throughout their day showing what it's like to be part of a program as well as their life outside of the program, (2) *Topper Tidbits* – videos showing a variety of aspects of campus life by promoting learning opportunities, student activities, athletic events, etc., and (3) *What's Up WestLib* – question and answer videos of students and their campus involvement. These marketing elements highlight WLU's four brand attributes and thus were designed to help communicate the WLU brand, externally and internally. In addition, the brand statement can be seen on the bottom of brochures, postcards, posters, commercial spots, and the website.



WLU Website. WLU's website is the primary 24-hour-a-day, 7-days-a-week, continuous marketing and brand representative of the university. This makes the WLU website extremely important. The WLU website is overseen by Tammi Secrist and the Marketing and Brand Management Team. Currently, WLU is in the process of rolling over to an entirely new website template. This is all being done by Whitney Inkster (Web Master), who lives in Florida and only has until June 30 remaining on her contract. Under this model, Whitney is the person doing all of the website rollover, while simultaneously loading and monitoring content, training and assisting campus content managers, maintaining and fixing problems.

Marketing Budget. WLU's current marketing budget is \$326,829. On the surface, this seems like an extraordinary amount of money for a budget. But, advertising is very expensive. For example, a typical advertising campaign for a series of just 7 to 12 television 15-second spots costs \$4,000 to \$5,000 or more. Furthermore, in 2009, the marketing budget was almost \$750,000. At that time, the \$750,000 was used to cover our local market and to market strategically extended areas such as Pittsburgh (PA), Washington County (PA), Greene County (PA), Parkersburg (WV), Eastern Panhandle (WV), Columbus (OH), Canton (OH), and Akron (OH). Now, however, due to the much decreased budget, only little extended marketing can be done.

Marketing by Individual Colleges. Each individual college, led by its dean, performs some sort of marketing. The college deans are charged with having a marketing and recruiting committee. However, there is very little communication between the individual colleges' marketing/recruiting efforts and Tammi Secrist. As a result, when individual colleges, departments, and programs perform marketing/recruiting activities, attend community events, and host activities and local schools on campus, it is rarely communicated to WLU's marketing and public relations departments.

Channel 14. Organizationally, Channel 14 is located under Jason Koegler (Vice President of Institutional Advancement). When it was originally founded, Channel 14 was given the cable channel by the City of Wheeling with the expectation that WLU would provide community-oriented programming. Operating Channel 14 is very expensive to operate, including the studio, the truck, equipment, student labor, employees' salaries, etc. The newest plan for Channel 14 is that it will soon exist within a new website called *Topper Station*. *Topper Station* (topperstation.com) is not a live website yet, but will serve as an umbrella for everything related to video and streaming for WLU once it is live. Also, within *Topper Station* will exist all streamed athletic events. In this way, Channel 14 will become an element of *Topper Station*. The purpose of *Topper Station* is to offer a much more dynamic, less antiquated, and more user-friendly way for viewers to see WL content on demand, anytime, through multiple modes of viewing (television, online) that can be viewed anytime – sort of like a *Netflix* for WLU. So, rather than using a platform such as Vimeo or Youtube, *Topper Station* will be something that is completely owned by WLU – WLU will control and own the banners, commercials, etc. Also, similar to Netflix or Hulu, viewers will be able to download the *Topper Station* app to their phones so they can watch live and on demand events. The final phase of the *Topper Station* app will be to enhance online education.

Athletics. The WLU Athletic Department utilizes events, press releases, TV coverage, newspaper coverage, social media, and community engagement as ways to market WLU. Moreover, the success of some WLU athletic programs further markets the university. Athletics has been viewed as the metaphorical “front door” of a college or university – in which the college is analogous to a house while its athletic department is analogous to the house's front door. In this way, the front door is the most visible part of the house from which people make judgments about what is inside the house. Consequently, many people make judgments about the overall quality of a college or university based on what they see or perceive as the quality of its athletic programs (Toma & Cross, 1998).

References

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- Weisbrod, B.A., Ballou, J.P., & Asch, E.D. (2008). *Mission and money: Understanding the university*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- West Liberty University Brand Guidelines (<https://westliberty.edu/brand/>)

Questions for Consideration

1. What is the gist of our current brand? Does our current brand reflect our actual identity and reputation? What did the various stakeholders seem to think of our brand?
2. Which aspects of our identity are misunderstood (i.e., many folks in the community think that we are a large university) and why?
3. Who are we REALLY? Is our current branding statement (from 2016) still applicable in explaining who we are?
4. Do our mission/vision statements communicate brand?
5. How do we best market/communicate brand? How are the following utilized, for example: website, Channel 14, marketing office, external recruiting, on-campus events, open houses, etc.?
6. Are we committing sufficient resources and staffing to our website (our most important marketing tool – our 24-hours-a-day, 7-days-per-week, all-the-time marketing and brand-management tool)?
7. Should we create a better way to organize, manage, and monitor WLU's many social media sites? Should we have a central monitoring system for our social media sites?
8. How do we best communicate individual colleges' efforts directed towards marketing/recruiting? Should we consider new or better ways to communicate when individual colleges or programs are doing things such as hosting events or K-12 students on-campus (e.g., Should a checklist be developed such as notifying Public Relations, Admissions, Campus Police, etc.)?
9. Are we being mindful of sharing our good news with those who can help us spread that good news? (e.g., Maureen, Theresa, Tammi, etc.) Should we educate employees on campus to ensure that they are telling everyone we need to in order to have good news spread effectively?
10. What is the best strategy for utilizing WL Channel 14? Where does Channel 14 best align strategically and organizationally? How should Channel 14 be used? Is Channel 14 a marketing tool, a recruiting tool, an educational opportunity for students, a fundraising tool, or a community engagement tool? Or all of these?
11. How can WLU communicate a consistent brand through logos, signage, merchandise, fields, vehicles, websites, social media, etc.?
12. Are there other ways to leverage athletics to market WLU?